Singing, Chanting and Waltzing Into New Season

by Cashman Kerr Prince

With innovative, centuries-spanning music under guest conductor Joseph Flummerfelt, Cantata Singers opened its 52nd season. Saturday night in Jordan Hall began with parallel settings of the same text: O vos omnes, drawn from the “Lamentations of Jeremiah” set both by Tomás Luis de Victoria and by Pablo Casals. The 16th-century Spaniard’s austere and beautiful polyphony was performed with limpid grace, reaching a very high standard. The second setting, by the famous Catalan, dates from the early 20th century; lushly romantic in the vein of Brahms, operatic in reach and scope, plaintively expressive of the despair in the words, this choral incarnation also features lusty poetry.

Parallelisms continued, this time with three 20th-century versions of the Lord’s Prayer. Peter Maxwell Davies’s declamatory version is filled with interesting tonalities and harmonies which serve to underscore the potent phrases. Maurice Duruflé’s Notre père vocally rendered the power of an organ in a cappella choral music with long lines and flowing sound, constituting an introspective act of piety in composition and in performance. Flummerfelt characterized Stravinsky’s Pater noster as “austere” but I heard more the lofty tradition of orthodox chanting. Verdi’s Ave Maria continued the exploration of religious music in a secular setting. While his Requiem is operatic, this choral song slowly unfolds as a seamlessly blended prayer set on a grand scale.

To round out the first half, Flummerfelt and the Cantata Singers turned to secular themes with a set of 20th-century part-songs. Britten’s “The Evening Primrose” is a small gem, not unlike its floral namesake. Setting a science-inflected meditation on the passage of time in the context of love, Irving Fine’s exquisite “The Hour-Glass” is a work I would happily hear over and over. Barber’s “The Coolin” is romantic and pastoral, earnest and playful. Pianists Eliko Akahori and Jenny Tang took the stage for songs by Copland: “Long Time Ago,” “At the River,” and “The Promise of Living.” These gorgeously innovative settings of familiar hymns make commonplace tunes vibrant.

The first half was a marvel of astute programming, not only the parallel renderings of texts but also the musical and harmonic interactions across works. Throughout, Cantata Singers responded to Flummerfelt’s easy direction with nuance, insight, and high technical fluency.
Following intermission, pianists and singers offered Brahms's *Liebeslieder Walzer*, op. 52, and *Neue Liebeslieder Walzer*, op. 65 (Zum Schluß). What a delightfully wacky treat! My giddy take: “I know—I’ll write a cycle of waltzes and have them narrate a love affair.” If one heard only the piano parts, one would be transported to a Viennese ball. The texts could make for a commentary on the social dynamics, or even a lieder cycle. The intriguing combination really seems to capture the Brahms’s notion of serious. The 7th song, “Wohl schön bewandt”, featured the dulcet voice of mezzo Jennifer Webb; the 17th, “Nicht vandle, mein Licht, dort außen,” showcased tenor Michael Merullo's flexible and expressive voice in an affective reading of this subliterate song. The two singers certainly endowed this inventive collection with memorable performances, as did all the Cantata Singers and ensemble. The promising start augurs w for the ensemble’s continuing concert and chamber seasons.

Cashman Kerr Prince, trained in Classics and Comparative Literature, is now a Visiting Scholar in the Department of Classical Studies at Wellesley College. He is also a cellist of some accomplishment, currently playing with the Brookline Symphony Orchestra.

Share this:

No Comments [leave a civil comment (others will be removed) and please disclose relevant affiliations]

No comments yet.

RSS feed for comments on this post.

Leave a comment

Name (required)

Verifiable email (will not be published) (required)

Website

Submit Comment

© B. M. Int.

If you would like to contribute to the Intelligencer, please familiarize yourself with our submission guidelines.